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**REMARKS
BY
U.S. AMBASSADOR TO BANGLADESH DAN MOZENA
INTERFAITH DIALOGUE ON RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE AND PEACE**

**BRAC CENTER AUDITORIUM, MOHAKHALI, DHAKA
AUGUST 22, 2013**

Professor Mabel Gomes, John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York

... and all the other organizers of this Interfaith Dialogue forum

Our distinguished speakers

... and all of you who, like me, believe in peace and harmony among the religions of the world

Asalaam ‘m-laikum, nameskar, aa-dub and good evening

It was a friendly argument ... mostly.

We were traveling by road to Dinajpur.

“Wow,” my wife Grace exclaimed, looking out the right side of the car, “these mustard fields are beautiful.”

“Yes,” I agreed, adding, “but even more beautiful are the hundreds of shades of green of the paddy that I can see from my side of the car.”

Glancing over my way, Grace agreed the paddy was spectacular, but insisted that the green and yellow of the mustard were even more beautiful.

So, the debate began ...

... which side of the car had captured Bangladesh as the most beautiful?

Our arrival in Dinajpur brought the matter to a close.

We later realized, of course, that we both had seen and appreciated the beauty and magic of the Bangladesh countryside ...

... the rich diversity of color ...

... whether the green and yellow of the mustard, or the hundreds of shades of green to recently sown paddy ...

... diversity...

... diversity is the beauty and magic of Bangladesh ...

... whether in the mosaic of colors of the countryside ...

... or in the mosaic of the people.

Of course, the greatest beauty of Bangladesh and the greatest magic of Bangladesh are the people ... the wonderful people who make this nation great.

Our speakers have introduced us to the diversity of the Bangladeshi people as they spoke of the traditions of the great religions of Bangladesh and the world: Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity.

As Grace and I crisscross Bangladesh from Tetulia to Teknaf, from Sylhet to Satkhira, we have seen firsthand the religious tapestry that is Bangladesh.

We visited the ancient Buddhist ruins of Paharpur and the fabulous temples and monasteries at Bandarban and Rangamati, and the Chatterwari temple complex in Chittagong...

... we saw Saat-Gombuj Mosque in Bagerhat and here in Dhaka the spectacular Star Mosque ...

... we saw Dhakeswari temple in Dhaka and other ancient Hindu sites around the country ...

... we visited the Armenian Church in old Dhaka, the chapel on the maidan in Mymensingh and other churches scattered across Bangladesh.

Grace and I have seen the diversity of religions of Bangladesh, the very diversity that our speakers have described to us ... a diversity well appreciated by Americans, as we, too, are of a land of great religious diversity.

Our main impression is how the people of these different religions have lived side-by-side in harmony for hundreds of years and how they continue to live side-by-side in peace and friendship to this very day.

Everywhere we go, we see that Bangladeshis of whatever religion have the same aspirations.

They want simply to build better lives for themselves and their families so they can provide their families good, safe shelter, ample, nutritious food, good healthcare and quality education.

Bangladeshis want simply to live in peace and harmony.

To this end, they respect their neighbors and their neighbors' religious beliefs.

This respect for each other's religions plays out at the village and community level as neighbor joins neighbor in celebrating their different religious holidays and festivals.

This respect for Bangladesh's religions plays out at the national level as the country observes as a national holiday a key festival of each religion.

I know of no nation where the President hosts a grand reception to commemorate the great feast days of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity.

All of this speaks volumes of the nation's acceptance of the religious diversity of its people ... and this is truly the beauty and magic of Bangladesh.

In this context, attacks against religious minorities are most jarring and disturbing.

We all recall the horrific destruction of Buddhist temples and monasteries in Ramu last September.

We recall the attacks in February against Hindus in Noakhali, Comilla, Barisal, Satkhira, Gaibandha, Chapainawabganj and other places.

Such attacks are not in character with the spirit of Bangladesh ... a spirit of tolerance, moderation, acceptance ... a spirit that reflects the Bangladeshi tradition of living in peace and harmony.

In my view, this violence against religious minorities is seldom, if ever, about religion.

Rather, it is about the pursuit of power, the pursuit of financial gain as cheap politicians and greedy land grabbers seek to advance their own selfish interests by creating and manipulating friction in the guise of religion to their own benefit.

These cheap politicians and greedy land grabbers are a threat to the nation.

Most recently, we saw how the greedy owner of Rana Plaza grabbed land from a Hindu family and built on it the building complex that is now known around the world as the symbol of greed, corruption and land grabbing from minorities.

And we saw the results of their handiwork as they sought earlier this year to pervert Islam, a religion of peace and harmony, into a religion of violence and intolerance.

I call upon the government of Bangladesh, the civil society of Bangladesh, and, most importantly, the people of Bangladesh to reject these cheap politicians and land grabbers who seek to use religion to advance their self-serving agendas to acquire power and wealth ...

I call on the people of Bangladesh to build on the values and aspirations shared by all Bangladeshis of all religions ... to live in peace as they seek to build better futures for themselves and their children.

I call on the people of Bangladesh to sustain and strengthen the nation's great traditions of peace and harmony, of living side-by-side with those who practice different faiths.

I call on you ... each of you ... leaders of your respective religions, leaders who build bridges of understanding among the nation's faiths ... I call on each of you to use your influence, your power of persuasion to foster and build the peace and harmony that all Bangladeshis seek.

As you lead your communities to build on the great values of peace and traditions of harmony that unite all Bangladeshis, I believe you are building Sonar Bangla, the shared vision of us all.

I wish you, the religious leaders of this nation, greatest success as you build the Sonar Bangla of our dreams.

Thank you.

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